

Is Voluntary Local Review only for show
or a genuine means of transformation?
Observations on discussions about
localising the SDGs
at the High-level Political Forum
on Sustainable Development

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#  Background

In July, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), under the auspices of ECOSOC, observed stronger voices and a renewed commitment from local and sub-national actors. Over the past years, participation has demonstrated the importance and potential for transformative change of local and regional actors working on sustainability. Accordingly, the most recent forum dedicated more space and time to the subject of localisation of the SDGs, in order to hear about the experiences, challenges, opportunities and lessons learned from the most progressive examples among local and regional actors. For example, Local 2030, a United Nations-led initiative for better coordination of UN entities on localisation issues, organised a two-day event under the theme "Local Action for Global Commitments." The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF), a mechanism for coordination and joint advocacy by international networks of local and regional governments, organised a one-day event titled "Local and Regional Government Day." During this year’s HLPF there were as many side events as at HLPF 2018, despite the fact that Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) was not under review

#  Observations

At this year’s HLPF it was evident that the Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have gathered significant attention from a variety of stakeholders. While the first VLRs were initiated in 2018 by four cities (Kitakyushu, Toyama, Shimokawa, and New York City), 2019 saw even more cities conducting such reviews, including Bristol,　Buenos Aires, Los Angeles, and Santana de Parnaíba, among others.

All cities that conducted the VLRs presented different visions, and the best way to describe this is via the phrase "same bed, but different dreams” (*dosho-imu*),aJapanese saying meaning that cities might be doing similar things, but pursuing different, potentially contradictory visions and goals. Noting that the actors involved in the VLRs have not produced a coherent message so far, it is useful for this commentary to attempt to understand the trend from a broader point of view, and its relation to frustrations as well as excitement generated by the SDGs and VNRs.

**Challenges**

What was echoed by many stakeholders throughout the forum was the need for a better way to monitor progress at the local level. Despite statistical improvements, however, geographical differences and challenges remain, and have not been adequately addressed through policymaking. These include, for example, depopulation in rural areas while a simultaneous rapid increase of population in major and mega cities takes place, or upgrading infrastructure in older cities while also building modern infrastructures for new ones. Given this situation, are the member states proactively capturing the local and regional differences within SDGs implementation? This is one area needing great improvement. Only 42% of all VNRs have engaged local and regional governments (LRGs) in their preparatory processes (Global Taskforce, 2019, p.23). And even though local dimensions of the SDGs are everywhere, this figure peaked in 2018, assumedly because Goal 11 was under review.

**Responses and Reasons for the VLR Trend**

This is where the VLRs can come in. As previously explained elsewhere ([link](https://archive.iges.or.jp/en/sdgs/apfsd/briefing-note-vlr.html)), there are three primary reasons why VLRs potentially contribute to the VNRs. In summary, VLRs can provide: 1. enhanced monitoring of local progress, 2. multi-layered multi-stakeholder engagement, and 3. acceleration of SDGs localisation.　This year alone, the cities of Bristol, Santana de Parnaiba, Buenos Aires, Helsinki, Taipei, and New Taipei, as well as others (this includes announcements made after the HLPF) are carrying out VLRs. Some of these have been initiated by the city hall itself, while others were inspired by external actors, like a development partner who has worked with the city for a long time.

How have VLRs gained so much attention that even people who did not attend the HLPF started conducting them? This situation might seem to be a win-win for all parties. As there is apparently large-scale buy-in on behalf of the UN, some cities see VLRs as an avenue to promote themselves and their commitment to the SDGs. Others view them as a genuine opportunity to review and prepare their SDGs implementation plan in order to leave no one behind. In some cases VLRs are “good language” for labeling their own existing stakeholder engagement mechanisms and/or local planning processes (Note: to watch a detailed discussion on VLRs, please visit the UN Web TV here: [link](http://webtv.un.org/search/part-4-local-2030-%E2%80%93-local-action-for-global-commitments-2019-hlpf-side-event-part1/6060539888001/?term=local%202030&sort=date)).

Many civil society groups widely support the VLRs because they provide alternative avenues for engagement. In meetings with different stakeholders at the HLPF, there were expressions of excitement as well as frustration. These came from the fact that stakeholders learn about the SDGs and the HLPF, but see limited or even a complete lack of meaningful space to engage at the national level. Reportedly, all VNRs carried out in 2018 engaged stakeholders around their development, and few established a formal mechanism for continuation of such exercises (Civil Society Coalition, 2018, p. iv). Precisely because the VLRs are centred around LRGs, which are closer to people and often more accessible for locally operating non-governmental actors, they can be a good entry point to the formal process for the SDGs.

**Questions Remain**

If the above situation is the reality, then local and regional stakeholders’ engagement within the national process should also be scrutinised. Although some countries seem confident about their stakeholder engagement mechanism, it should be asked: are those sufficiently participatory for local actors (like SMEs, NGOs, and schools, among others) which do not necessarily have connections to larger national advocacy groups? There is certainly an endless quest for inclusiveness and such inadequate coordination must not be used against an existing constituency or coordinating body. Rather, it should be taken as a chance to explore an alternative approach - inserting multi-layered and multi-stakeholder engagement into the VNRs through the use of VLRs might open up more opportunities to address policy at the appropriate level.

As we move forward, let us assume our collective goal is the following: we want to strengthen the VNRs and monitoring mechanisms to make sure implementation is on track and leaves no one behind. Inevitably, the VLRs alone are an insufficient condition for global transformation. While it is positive to have more VLRs, there are fewer marginal constructive gains for conversations at the HLPF. Whereas the VNR presentations are said to be too short, and some suggest a shift of focus to regional fora, there would certainly be less space for presenting VLRs at the global level. To achieve the above-mentioned goal, what solutions shall we pursue? This is an open question to be explored through the HLPF review process.

#  Final thought

This year HLPF echoed the exact same message as in 2018: “progress has been made, yet remains insufficient.” Year after year, there appears to be more innovative implementation, projects, and technologies discussed at the HLPF. However, we are not on track for achieving the SDGs. Why is this so? Perhaps more accessible, ground-level action are needed. One such action is to engage cities and regions (#Listen2Cities), since they are closer to the people. Unless national governments can effectively respond to the call by Local and Regional Governments for changes in national policies, since such policies often manifest their negative impact at the local level, how can we ensure that no one is left behind?

# References

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